

LOWER SUNBURY RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION



2007 AGM NEWSLETTER

www.losra.org

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Lower Sunbury Residents' Association will take place at The Riverside Arts Centre, Thames Street, Sunbury, on Wednesday 27th June at 8pm.

Waste Disposal and Recycling to be featured at this year's AGM

We have responded to views expressed to us by a number of residents regarding the plans for fortnightly rubbish collections to accommodate recycling measures, and the proposed universal use of wheelie bins, and will be featuring the issue at our AGM. There will be a presentation by Dr Sandy Muirhead, Spelthorne Borough Council's Head of Environment Services, explaining the proposals and their timing, with an opportunity for everyone to ask questions.

People are concerned about the health and vermin implications of food and similar waste being in bins for two weeks, and also about the unsightliness and for some people the sheer unmanageability of the large wheelie bins being kept outside the front of houses in our area.

This is obviously a central government initiative, but some areas in the UK have successfully opposed it. We need to know what your views are so that we can properly represent them - views among members of our Committee are mixed. If people are generally in favour of the proposals, it is hard for us to oppose them, even if there are some minority concerns.

However, if there is a strong body of opinion against the initiative, we need to get the views into the public domain as soon as possible, as the plans are already in place, with implementation scheduled for the autumn. We do not know whether the Council have already purchased the 73,000 wheelie bins needed for the scheme at a planned cost of £1.1m.

Obviously, if this is an issue which concerns you, please come to the AGM to see the presentation, participate in the discussion and ensure that Spelthorne's officer knows what people think. If the issue particularly concerns you, please write to us or e-mail info@losra.org.uk

AGENDA

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 28th June 2006
3. Chairman's Annual Report
4. Treasurer's Report
5. Election of Officers and Committee
6. Presentation by Dr. Sandy Muirhead of Spelthorne Borough Council on Waste Management and Recycling
7. Sunbury Embroidery Gallery : Report by Robert Shaw, Chairman of Sunbury Embroidery Group
8. Open Forum
9. Any other business

Are our views being properly represented over Local Development Framework?

Our councillors have always assured LOSRA that they were not developer-friendly but on April 26th at full Council, when they had an opportunity to match their words with action, they failed to deliver. A vote was taken on the Local Development Framework, which will determine development policies for the next 20 years, despite the fact that the majority of councillors had not even read it. The document runs to 400 pages and was not supplied with the Agenda nor was it published on the website. Sunbury Common Councillor, Ian Beardsmore, proposed various amendments aimed at housing densities, car parking provision and demanding infrastructure contributions from developers, each of which would have made Spelthorne less of a soft target for speculative developers. Instead what the public witnessed was an undignified and sustained attack on the Opposition and an effective gagging of their amendments, which were not even discussed. Party politics yet again trumped loyalty to constituents' interests. It was more important to defeat the Opposition, who had at least read the document, than to have to admit that they had something useful to say.

Benwell Centre : Ombudsman yields to MP's pressure and clears Council

The enquiry into the complaint of maladministration by Spelthorne Borough Council over Day Centre closures concluded with the Local Government Ombudsman clearing the Council of any wrongdoing. It is our contention that the judgement is perverse not only because the evidence presented to the LGO was so compelling but also because we now have documentary evidence of political interference. This interference not only changed the course of the enquiry but also seriously compromised the independence and impartiality of the LGO, and in this the LGO acquiesced. What follows is a concluding summary of events.

In March 2006, the LOSRA Chairman, together with two other Residents' Association representatives, met with our Spelthorne MP, David Wilshire. As constituents, we asked him to intercede on our behalf to persuade the Council to change its mind over the closure of the Benwell Day Centre. He advised us that he could not, and would not, become involved as it was a Local Authority matter. We reluctantly accepted his position.

In April 2006, the now infamous full Council meeting - attended by some 400 (mostly elderly) residents, confirmed the closure and sale of the site. The Liberal Democrat Opposition Party, hopelessly outnumbered, were the only ones to vote against.

In May 2006, LOSRA combined with 3 other Residents' Associations in lodging a complaint to the independent Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) alleging maladministration by Spelthorne B.C. The grounds have been widely publicised and are by now well known, but included ignoring of their own expert consultant's report, a flawed consultation exercise, and misrepresentation of the measures as an 'improvement' in services.

During the course of that enquiry, the appointed investigator from the LGO's Office had agreed to meet the complainants on a site visit at the Benwell Day Centre. The Council was, as a courtesy, informed of this planned visit as the Day Centre is a Council property.

On 7th March 2007, on hearing of the forthcoming visit, the Head of Corporate Governance of SBC, Michael Graham, sent a disgraceful e-mail to the Assistant LGO in which he traduced the complainants as 'seasoned political campaigners' (he would have been aware of the apolitical constitution of LOSRA) and suggested that our activities were purely designed to cause political embarrassment so close to the local elections. He all but withdrew his consent to the LGO's visit to the Benwell Centre.

In his now well-publicised e-mail, he told the Assistant LGO that he had enlisted the support of the Council's Chief Executive, Roberto Tambini, who had in turn written

to the local MP, Mr. David Wilshire. Since then, in a comment to the Surrey Herald, Mr. Graham said of his e-mail : "If I had known the Ombudsman was going to copy it to all and sundry, I would have been more careful in what I was saying."

Mr Wilshire, who had earlier told us that he could not become involved and had declined to act on his constituents' behalf, promptly wrote a letter to Mr Tony Redmond, the LGO himself, in which he unashamedly leant on him saying '...I would welcome your urgent personal intervention in this matter and your assurance that no visit will take place....' It was evidently more important to protect the Council than it was to come to the assistance of his constituents.

The text of the letter was only disclosed after repeated requests and applications for disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act both to the MP and the LGO.

As a consequence of this, the planned meeting with the LGO's investigator at the Benwell Centre was cancelled, and in its place a carefully choreographed and time-limited meeting was convened in the London office of the LGO. The Chairman of LOSRA was amongst those who were excluded from attending this meeting. The result of the investigation, which was by now predictable, was published shortly thereafter.

It is difficult to imagine a more egregious example of political interference into the supposed independence of the Local Government Ombudsman. The anger felt by those who had devoted hundreds of hours in pursuit of a valid complaint is matched only by the despair at the LGO's meekness in capitulating to this political pressure.

We repeat that LOSRA is an apolitical organization. We have no party political allegiances - we simply try to persuade our elected representatives to support our aspirations, and it is entirely coincidental if political parties choose to take one side or another in the arguments. Our complaint related to the way the consultation and decision-making process over the Benwell Centre was handled by Spelthorne. It had been going on for months, and the timing had nothing to do with local elections.

Many would take the view that senior Council officers have adopted a politically partisan approach to the issue, and have used political means to subvert the LGO's investigation into their actions, as well as gratuitously misrepresenting the status and motives of residents' groups. This surely cannot be acceptable. We are considering the legal implications of the situation, and the propriety of the actions of those involved. If you would like to see all the correspondence and a fuller account of the circumstances, it is available on LOSRA's website at www.losra.org.uk.

Area Forums : our fears confirmed

The Area Forum of 27th February 2007 took place shortly after distribution of the last newsletter. As expected, it was a stage-managed affair with insufficient time for all residents to be heard.

Despite the fact that there are only two such events per year, one Sunbury councillor stood at the back of the hall and made no contribution whatsoever and another had excused himself as it was his wife's birthday! You have to make up your own minds as to how seriously such councillors take these valuable though infrequent opportunities to hear and respond to their community.

The importance to the Council of this platform for consultation is demonstrated by the time gap which will elapse before the next one. It will be held on 2nd October, a full 8 months after the last Forum.

As noted elsewhere, following the local elections Sunbury is now represented by eight Liberal Democrat councillors and one Conservative, Andrew Hirst. Cllr Hirst has been an excellent and scrupulously fair chairman of the Forum in the past but due to his Mayoral duties, will be unable to officiate this year.

Inexplicably, instead of allowing one of the other elected Sunbury members to take the Chair, the Council voted at the Council AGM on 24th May to appoint a Shepperton councillor, Mr Smith-Ainsley (Con), to chair the Sunbury Forum. This would seem to be manifestly unfair both to Cllr. Smith-Ainsley and to the Sunbury electorate, and there seems to be some petty political point-scoring going on. Whatever the illogical reason, mark up your calendar for the next Area Forum on Tuesday 2nd October.

Inspector allows appeal on Green Street development

As most will have seen from the local papers, the combined efforts of LOSRA and the Green Street Action Group failed to persuade the Planning Inspector to refuse the application by Cliveden Homes to build a block of 10 flats, 4 houses and an access road on the site of two houses in Green Street. During the course of the 2-day Public Inquiry we became increasingly suspicious that the decision had more or less been taken even before the Inquiry had started. The merits of a number of our arguments did not even feature in the final report. Though unsuccessful, the campaign demonstrated the quite incredible membership response to a call to arms, with 327 protest letters received even before the appeal; and many more thereafter. The approval was for an outline plan only, so close monitoring of the final plans will be our next responsibility.

It needs to be emphasised that our position had been severely weakened by the fact that the Planning Officer had recommended approval after previously advising against approval of almost identical plans. There were strong planning grounds for rejection, as the Planning Committee demonstrated, based on our victory in a previous inquiry, but the culture in the Planning Department seems to be in favour of building houses wherever they can, regardless of the acute environmental problems of traffic congestion, air quality and an over-stretched infrastructure. Changing this culture has to remain our single most important objective.

Victory on Green St. car park charging

Many thanks to all of you who responded to our appeal in the last newsletter and wrote to Spelthorne objecting to the proposal to introduce Pay-and-Display charging in the Green Street Sunbury Park car park. The overwhelming opposition was enough to persuade the Council, under pressure from our elected representatives, to shelve this ill-conceived plan. The car park will remain free to all who wish to use this valuable community asset.

'Benwell factor' triggers upheaval at local elections

There were extraordinary results in the Sunbury East and West wards at the local elections, as 5 of the 6 seats were taken from the Conservatives by the Lib Dems. Only Cllr Andrew Hirst survived of the sitting councillors. The biggest shock was the defeat of long-standing councillor Gerry Ceaser, current leader of the Council.

The result was explained by the huge 48% turnout, compared to a Spelthorne average of about 33%, meaning that the sitting councillors lost despite polling their usual number of votes. The perceived wisdom is that the high profile Lib Dem campaign mobilised what always threatened to be a strong protest vote over the issue of the Benwell Centre closure.

LOSRA's perhaps utopian view is that party politics are, or ought to be, largely irrelevant to community and amenity issues. It's often quite pathetic and frustrating to witness the pettiness of party-based arguments, posturing and voting in the Council Chamber. Our job is to work with whoever our elected representatives are to get the right decisions at Knowle Green, and we will continue to do so.

It remains to be seen whether the message the electorate has sent out with these results has any effect on the attitudes in the local corridors of power. In the meantime, we thank our departing councillors for the work they have done on our behalf in the past, some inevitably more than others. We welcome our new councillors to their exacting role, and hope they will be able to deliver the strategies and decisions we need to protect the quality of life in Sunbury.

Protecting our trees

LOSRA is concerned about the number of roadside and other trees which are being felled, and is pursuing the issue of Tree Preservation Orders with Spelthorne B.C. and Surrey C.C.. If there are important trees which you think are under threat, please contact Peter Francis on 770661.

In the meantime, you can help by having trees planted in your area and in your garden. For only £30, local tree warden volunteers can supply trees, and will deliver and plant them for you. They can plant in gardens, and with authorisation from Surrey CC Highways Dept. can plant on roadsides and other open spaces.

Applications for roadside trees need to be vetted, so it's important to contact them in good time for the autumn. If you would like a tree or trees just contact : Dave Woods 01932 786806; Dave Huxford 0794 1093186; Sally Fletcher 01932 227679 or 07778 370571. The Surrey Tree Warden Network is a registered charity.

Thanks for response to subscriptions appeal

Our thanks to all of you who have paid your LOSRA subscription after our appeal in the last newsletter. We had an excellent response. If you have not yet paid, please make use of the form below, and deliver your subscription to one of the shops noted, or to a Committee member.

THE LOSRA COMMITTEE

Pamela Cabannes	4 Forge Mews	761131
Tony Cannings	90 Manor Lane	789750
Elleke Carling	3 Croysdale Avenue	882 726
Don Cunningham	2 Parkwood Grove	889033
Peter Francis	Linden Lodge, Woodlands Drive	770661
Cathie French	173 French Street	789157
Roger Harding	Sunmead Cottage, Green St.	782744
John Hirsh (Chairman)	21 School Walk	781363
Mike Rigby (Treasurer)	26 Queensway TW16 6HB	789013
Patrick Smith	6 Maryland Way	
Pat Stone	Adelphi, Parke Road	
Paul Watts (President)	87 The Avenue TW16 5HZ	788449
Chris Wills	Mon Abri, Wheatleys Ait	780574
David Woods	47 Sunna Gardens	786806

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

If you have not already paid your subscription for this year, could you please help us by dropping your subscription in to one of our three collection points using the tear-off slip below. You can deliver it to either Skinners in Avenue Parade or Twirltour Travel in Green Street, or to a Committee member. Our thanks to these businesses for their help in providing this service.

Albert Skinner commemorated with benches and tree

Torrential rain on May Bank Holiday failed to deter a large crowd of family, friends and Sunbury residents who gathered in Orchard Meadow to see a commemorative bench dedicated to the memory of Albert Skinner, and a tree planted. There is also a commemorative bench in the Walled Garden.

Residents are grateful to Mr Skinner's family and colleagues, who organised the occasion and raised the funds, for the opportunity to celebrate Albert's contribution to the community.

Are there any designers who can help us?

LOSRA is working with the Sunbury Embroidery Group to re-publish the very successful Sunbury Trail booklet we produced a few years ago which has gone out of print.

We need the voluntary assistance of someone with computer-based design skills and facilities using Quark Express or similar in order to re-design the layout and illustration of the booklet.

If you are able to help, please contact Paul Watts on 01932 788449 or paulwatts@tiscali.co.uk.

Does Blue Dragon car park need CCTV?

We have been asked by the Lower Sunbury Business Community to support an initiative to install CCTV in the Blue Dragon car park in Thames Street. LOSRA does not have financial resources to contribute to such projects, but would support it if residents in the area felt that there is a sufficient security problem which would be helped by having CCTV.

If you live or work in the area and use the car park, please let us know your views by writing to the Chairman, or e-mailing us at info@losra.org.uk

Please find enclosed my annual subscription of £2.00 for family membership of the Lower Sunbury Residents' Association for the calendar year 2007.

Name : Address :

E-mail address Tel. no. : (AGM07)